

Evaluating Community-based Language Development Activities with the Sustainable Use Model: A Tsakhur Case Study

Kathleen Sackett and Linda Humnick, SIL International
kathleen_sackett@sil.org; linda_humnick@sil.org

1 Objective

This study uses the Sustainable Use Model (Lewis and Simons 2011) to evaluate the effectiveness of language development activities among the Tsakhur of Azerbaijan, who are split between communities in the Zaqatala region with stable orality (6a) and communities in the Qax region with some disruption in intergenerational language transmission (6b). Since most language development activity is being initiated by the more vital Zaqatala community, the evaluation focuses on that community, with only minor comments on how language development in the Zaqatala region is likely to affect the Qax region.

2 Sustainable Use Model (henceforth SUM)

2.1 Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) is used as a measure of language vitality (Lewis and Simons 2010)

(Table reproduced from Lewis and Simons 2010 and adapted to show sustainable levels in bold.)

Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (adapted from Fishman 1991)*			
LEVEL	LABEL	DESCRIPTION	UNESCO
0	International	The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions.	Safe
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level.	Safe
2	Regional	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.	Safe
3	Trade	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.	Safe
4	Educational	Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education.	Safe
5	Written	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.	Safe
6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.	Safe
6b	Threatened	The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the childbearing generation are transmitting it to their children.	Vulnerable
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves but none are transmitting it to their children.	Definitely Endangered
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.	Severely Endangered
8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.	Critically Endangered
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.	Extinct
10	Extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.	Extinct

2.2 Four levels of language development are inherently sustainable due to the societal conditions associated with them:

- **Sustainable History** (10) – there is no active use of the language but it is documented and archived
- **Sustainable Identity** (9) – there is symbolic use of the language associated with the ethnic identity of a community
- **Sustainable Orality** (6a) – there is a community using the language orally in community life and passing oral proficiency on to the next generation
- **Sustainable Literacy** (4) – there is a community using the language for literacy and institutions that ensure the transmission of literacy between generations

2.3 Basic assumptions (Lewis 2010, Lewis and Simons 2011, Karan 2012)

Rule of Sustainability (Mountain Model of Slopes and Plateaus)

Given that there are only 4 sustainable levels of language use in the 13-level EGIDS scale, when conditions are stable:

1. Sustainable levels will remain at the same level of vitality.
2. Other levels will decay to the next lower sustainable level.

1. Language development must take into consideration “the complete linguistic repertoire” of a community, not just a specific language in isolation.
2. Language development is inherently tied to the maintenance of cultural identity.
3. Language development must be driven by the community and based on a shared vision of the level of use the community desires to achieve.
4. The current vitality status of the language within a given community determines its potential for maintenance and development.
5. Each level of language vitality has specific societal conditions from 5 categories (FAMED conditions) associated with it. Four levels are inherently sustainable based on these conditions, and the rest are not. To achieve a given level of sustainability, the conditions for that level must be met.
6. Language development should be designed to address the societal factors (FAMED conditions) that are inherent to the nearest sustainable level the community desires to reach. If that level is higher than the current level of development, the most effective development begins by addressing the FAMED conditions of the next level up until the sustainable level is reached, which is known as the **Step-up Principle**. In cases where upward progress from a non-sustainable level is unrealistic, language development also includes planning for a “soft landing” at the next lower sustainable level.¹

¹ An example of a “soft landing” could be documenting aspects of the oral language while a community is moving down to the level of sustainable identity.

3 The Tsakhur in Azerbaijan

The Tsakhur are a Caucasian people numbering 22,843 who live in southern Dagestan and in northwest Azerbaijan. In the Zaqatala and Qax region of Azerbaijan there are approximately 13,000 Tsakhur (Lewis 2009). Tsakhur is a member of the Lezgi subgroup of Nakh-Daghestani Languages.

Profile of the Azerbaijani Tsakhur Community in Terms of the FAMED Conditions²

EGIDS Level	Functions functions of Tsakhur in the community (oral and written use associated with specific domains of knowledge)	Acquisition degree to which acquisition of Tsakhur is taking place	Motivation motivation for the use of Tsakhur in specific functions	Environment degree to which the external environment is supportive of Tsakhur use for specific functions	Differentiation differentiation of functions between Tsakhur & other languages in the community's repertoire
4: Educational (Sustainable Literacy)	Adequate vernacular literature exists in every domain for which vernacular writing is desired.	Vernacular literacy is being taught by trained teachers under the auspices of a sustainable institution.	Members of the language community perceive the economic, social, religious, and identificational benefits of reading and writing in the local language.	Official government policy calls for the cultivation of this language and cultural identity and the government has put this policy into practice by sanctioning an official orthography and using its educational institutions to transmit local language literacy.	Members of the language community have a set of shared norms as to when to use the local language orally and in writing versus when to use a more dominant language.
5: Written (Incipient Literacy)	Enough literature exists in some domains to exemplify the value of vernacular literacy.	There are adequate materials to support vernacular literacy instruction and some members of the community are successfully using them to teach others to read and write the language.	Some members of the language community perceive the benefits of reading and writing their local language, but the majority of them still do not.	<div>Official government policy encourages the development of this language OR has nothing to say about ethno-linguistic diversity or language development and thus raises no impediment to the use & development of this language.</div> <p>Official government policy not only affirms the oral use of Tsakhur but also provides for it to be taught in school, though little effort is put into supporting this provision. More effort is placed on learning English & Russian as second languages.³</p>	Members of the language community have a set of shared norms as to when to use the local language orally versus when to use a more dominant language, but for writing, some members of the language community use the local language in written form for particular functions while others use a more dominant language for many of the same functions.

² The FAMED conditions profile is adapted from Karan (2012) to include information specific to the Tsakhur: solid outline = conditions of the Zaqatala community; dotted outline = conditions of the Qax community; dots and dashes = conditions shared by both. Arrows indicate that a particular condition is in an upward or downward trend.

³ Mammadov 2009.

6a: Vigorous (Sustainable Orality)	<p>Adequate oral use exists in every domain for which oral use is desired (but there is no written use).</p> <p>In the Zaqatala region Tsakhur is used in the home and village for all oral communication. In the regional center it is used for business transactions between Tsakhur, but in all other domains communication is in Azeri. All schools are taught in Azeri. Some villages teach Tsakhur as a subject in grades 2-4, but it is mainly oral communication that is being taught, as there are no adequate materials to teach Tsakhur in written form.</p>	<p>There is full oral transmission of the vernacular language to all children in the home (literacy acquisition, if any, is in the second language).</p> <p>Those living in Tsakhur villages in Zaqatala are actively transmitting the language to their children. Most of the children go to school at age 6 only speaking Tsakhur or they go to a preparatory pre-school at age 5 to begin learning Azeri.</p>	<p>Members of the language community perceive the economic, social, religious, and identificational benefits of using their language orally, but they perceive no benefits in reading and writing it.</p> <p>While many members of the community see the benefits of using their language in oral communication, they fear that it may be a hindrance to social and economic growth and that identification with a minority group carries a certain amount of stigma. They walk a fine line between the advantages they gain by identifying themselves as Tsakhur and the political and social advantages that may come from identifying with the larger Azeri population.</p>	<p>Official government policy affirms the oral use of the language, but calls for this language to be left in its current state and not developed.</p>	<p>Members of the language community have a set of shared norms as to when to use the local language orally versus when to use a more dominant language, but they never use the local language in written form.</p> <p>Most community members share a set of norms for using Tsakhur versus Azeri in oral form. A few use Tsakhur in written form. Until 2011 there had been no written standard, but there is now a group of community members that feel that providing a standard written form of Tsakhur will encourage greater use of the language in both written and oral communication—especially for those 20 and younger.</p>
6b: Threatened	<p>Adequate oral use exists for some domains for which oral use is desired (but not for all).</p> <p>In some villages of the Qax region, Tsakhur is the primary means of oral communication. In many other villages only those 30 and over use it among themselves, while those younger than 30 prefer Azeri for all communication. This is partly due to the fact that the population in these villages is mixed—Tsakhur and Azeri—and intermarriage is more common.</p>	<p>The language is used orally within all generations but only some of the childbearing generation are transmitting it to their children in the home.</p> <p>In mixed marriages and in many families in the childbearing stage, Tsakhur is not being transmitted to the next generation.</p>	<p>Members of the childbearing generation perceive the benefit of using their language orally for some purposes, but for others find more benefit in shifting to a more dominant language.</p> <p>The Tsakhur of the Qax region perceive very few benefits of using Tsakhur. To a large extent, they see greater advantages in identifying themselves with the Azeri community than in identifying with the Tsakhur community.</p>	<p>(as above)</p>	<p>Some members of the childbearing generation use the local language orally for functions that were traditionally reserved for the local language, while others use a more dominant language for many of the same functions.</p> <p>The majority of the childbearing generation use Azeri for most social communication that was traditionally in Tsakhur.</p>
7: Shifting (& 8a/b)	<p>There are entire generations that no longer have full oral use of the language.</p>	<p>The only transmission of the language is for identificational use (often in institutional settings rather than the home).</p>	<p>The childbearing generation finds no practical benefit in speaking the language, though they may still find sentimental benefit.</p>	<p>(as above)</p>	<p>(as above)</p>

4 Language Development

4.1 SUM Principles for language development (Lewis 2010, Karan 2012)

1. Step-up principle – development should address the next EGIDS level up without skipping levels until a sustainable level is reached.
2. Maintaining a non-sustainable level is not an option. A language at a non-sustainable level will move to the next sustainable level up or down.
3. Maintaining the current sustainable level is an option when reaching the next sustainable level up is unrealistic.
4. Language development activities should address specific FAMED conditions.

4.2 Tsakhur Development Profile based on SUM

Steps in SUM Development Profile ⁴	Zaqatala Tsakhur Language Development Steps ⁵
1. Define the scope of the speech community.	1. Language development work was initiated by the Tsakhur in the Zaqatala region to meet the needs of that community. Participation from the Qax Region would be welcomed, though there is none at present.
2. Identify the current level of language vitality of the language of concern within the speech community.	2. The Zaqatala community has assessed their language vitality to be level 6a: sustainable orality.
3. Identify the level of sustainable use that the community hopes to achieve.	3. While the community's ideal in the past has been sustainable literacy (level 4), this goal has been determined to be unrealistic, and the current concern is to be able to maintain level 6a at a time when the conditions inherent to the stability of 6a show signs of shifting in the area of motivation. At the same time, the community recognizes that level 5 literacy activities will address a need for the language to be usable for all the desired social functions.
4. Identify the sociolinguistic conditions in the community in terms of the FAMED conditions profile for the language of concern.	4. See section 3.
5. Identify the FAMED categories for which conditions are not met for the next level up – that is, the areas where activity is needed – OR plan for a “soft landing” at the next lower sustainable level.	5. Conditions relating to functions, acquisition and differentiation need to be addressed at level 5. Motivation needs to be addressed at level 5 and 6a. Since government policy provides for vernacular literacy, the conditions related to environment are already met at level 5, and no action is needed.
6. Design specific development activities to address the conditions where activity is needed (e.g. if acquisition is not taking place, then design acquisition products).	6. See section 4.3 for activity list.
7. Monitor progress towards the desired level of sustainable use. Reevaluate desired level of sustainable use and/or revise plan as needed.	7. An informal group of individuals meets periodically to consider the efficacy of the development activities taking place among the Tsakhur.

⁴ This profile is a synthesis of steps described in Karan (2012).

⁵ An informal group of individuals is initiating Tsakhur language development in the Zaqatala Region of Azerbaijan. This includes lay community members of various ages, a group of teachers and school administrators, and a group of high school students. There is one key individual that coordinates communication between the groups.

4.3 Development activities currently taking place in the Zaqatala Tsakhur community

Addressing Level 6a – Motivation - step-up means helping community members to see the benefits in using their language in oral communication. (Tsakhur language development addresses motivation primarily through products that strengthen and celebrate cultural identity. Products that promote awareness of the language and culture beyond the local community are assumed to create identificational benefits by demonstrating the intrinsic value of the culture.)

1. Video – a documentary about Tsakhur culture and arts
2. People group brochure – a description of the Tsakhur and their culture in Russian/Azeri/English aimed at those outside the community
3. Ethnolinguistic website – a collection of language and cultural materials intended both for the community and to increase worldwide awareness of the Tsakhur

Addressing Level 5 – Functions - step-up means increasing the number of domains in which vernacular literature exists.

4. Proverbs book – a collection of Tsakhur traditional proverbs with an explanation of the cultural reference and its application (also 6a motivation)
5. Cookbook – a collection of traditional recipes and edibles (also 6a motivation)
6. Riddle Book – a pocket sized book intended for reading “on the go” at a level comfortable for beginning readers
7. Anthology of Khan Almaz’s⁶ work – a collection of poetry, prose, and plays (also 6a motivation)

Addressing Level 5 – Acquisition - step-up means developing sufficient materials and training teachers to adequately support vernacular literacy instruction. The Tsakhur want the focus for literacy acquisition to be the current generation that is 20 and younger.

8. Orthography development
9. Alphabet poster
10. Primer Development

Addressing Level 5 – Motivation – step-up means helping community members to see the benefits of reading and writing in their language.

11. Calendar with Tsakhur artwork and poetry – a celebration of the culture intended to motivate reading through short verses on key cultural themes
12. Orthography Committee – a committee formed to enable more community input into the orthography
13. Concerned community members - a group who meets together to discuss development issues and interact with influential individuals in the Tsakhur villages in the Zaqatala region

Addressing Level 5 – Differentiation – step-up means that members of the community are beginning to develop literacy functions in Tsakhur that are differentiated from the functions of literacy in a more dominant language.

14. Informal meetings with the younger generation – a means to increase their involvement by engaging them in the development of orthography and literacy materials with special emphasis on using Tsakhur to text and IM. This allows the younger generation to help define the domains in which they desire to use Tsakhur, Azeri, and Russian.
15. Ethnolinguistic website – an electronic means to provide written information and materials in Tsakhur, as well as an opportunity to interact using the written form of their language.

⁶ Khan Almaz is a respected Tsakhur author with a rich collection of writing that to date has been stored in old suitcases and boxes.

4.4 Additional evaluation points

- Current language development efforts address a change that the community fears is taking place in one of the conditions inherent to sustainable orality: a decrease in motivation for oral transmission. This change could lead to a shift to threatened status (6b), which has already taken place in the Qax community. For this reason, the community is finding it necessary to address motivation at level 6a rather than only at level 5, which could justify even more oral-medium rather than written products celebrating cultural identity.
- Since motivation is a key reason for the shift from 6a to 6b, efforts to address this condition at level 6a will not only “shore up” the stability of use in the Zaqatala community but would also support the Qax community if they were ever to undertake the step-up from 6b to 6a.
- Being aware of the SUM principles of development has allowed the community to realize that the focus of language development should NOT be the development of materials for a full-fledged literacy program in the public schools—which would be in focus if moving from level 5 to level 4—but rather those that enhance the motivations for Tsakhur literacy, which is essential in the step-up from 6a to 5.
- Though a Tsakhur dictionary is a product desired by the community, it is not a good product to address the current level of vitality. (It would be more appropriate in moving from level 5 to level 4.)
- The community’s increasing use of digital communication means that some level of literacy is needed in order to maintain all of the desired social functions of Tsakhur for the younger generations.
- In order to motivate the next childbearing generation to transmit oral language and to use literacy, more language products should be targeting adolescents and young adults, and orthography development should take into account the perspective and needs of adolescents and young adults.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Advantages observed in using this approach in the Tsakhur community⁷

- The community is able to more realistically assess their language vitality and set goals for language development.
- The community is able to see what the most urgent short-term needs are for a level 6a language and break the work into manageable tasks.
- The community is able to understand all that is required to reach sustainable literacy and is able to determine that it may not be a realistic goal.
- The development activities taking place among the Zaqatala Tsakhur are more accurately meeting specific current needs of the community.

5.2 Problems encountered using this approach in the Tsakhur community:

- Laymen in the community need to understand a lot of information in order to apply the theory.
- Community members initially struggled to evaluate their current level of vitality realistically.
- The community is uncertain how to monitor and evaluate progress in language development.

⁷ Karan (2012) lists the following 2 benefits of SUM in setting goals: 1) language development activities are more effective because they meet the immediate needs in the community rather than a distant goal and 2) communities understand how much work is needed in order to achieve a higher sustainable level.

- The appropriate products do not necessarily match the ones desired by those willing to contribute resources.
- The community struggles to choose between status products and those that promote vitality.
- Some grass roots efforts or highly motivated activities are being overlooked by focusing on sustainability.
- The local community understands that sustainable literacy (4) requires actions from outside itself; however, this realization makes them think working towards this level is not an option, as they do not yet see advocacy as an action they can take in language development.

5.3 Remaining issues

- The model suggests that, if attaining sustainable literacy (level 4) is felt to be unrealistic, then efforts at level 5 (initial literacy) are unproductive—as that level will eventually degrade to 6a. However, this principle does not address the case when a community desires level 5 activities to address its felt needs.
- The evaluation of level 6a as an inherently sustainable level would appear to be dependent on the language being able to meet all the desired social functions of the community, which has traditionally been possible with only oral communication. With the growing role of digital communication, particularly written forms in social communication, the desired social functions can no longer be met without some level of literacy, which could destabilize this otherwise inherently stable level.
- Should the development of the 6a community be geared only towards its own progress or also helping the 6b community? We would expect that the activities in the 6a community addressing motivations at 6a should have an impact upon functions and acquisition of the 6b community.
- To what extent can the local community create motivation for using the local language; to what extent is it the national government's role?
- As this is a community-based model, communities need to understand that a part of that is advocating outside of the community to address motivational and environmental conditions.

References

- Fishman, Joshua A. 1991. *Reversing language shift*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Karan, Mark. 2012. SUM, EGIDS, FAMED conditions and SUM benefits, new strategy formulation tool for language development. Presentations at the Eurasia Area LPM Focus, Holzhausen, Germany.
- Lewis, M. Paul (ed.) 2009. *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*. Sixteenth edition. Dallas, TX: SIL International. Online: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.
- Lewis, M. Paul. 2010. The Sustainable Use Model and the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale. Paper presented at the ILAC VI, Penang, Malaysia.
- Lewis, M. Paul, and Gary F. Simons. 2010. Assessing endangerment: Expanding Fishman's GIDS. *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique* 55.103–120.
- 2011. Ecological perspectives on language endangerment: Applying the Sustainable Use Model for language development. Colloquium presented at the annual conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Chicago. <http://www.sil.org/~simons/presentation/Applying%20the%20SUM.pdf>.
- Mammadov, Azad. 2009. The issue of plurilingualism and language policy in Azerbaijan. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 198.65–73.